



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ATTEMPTED SEIZURE OF THE ZAFFARINE ISLANDS

In an address before the Royal Military academy John Ruskin once said that the strength of a nation was in its men, "in their unity and virtue, not in their standing room; a little group of wise hearts is better than a wilderness of fools; and only that nation gains true territory, which gains itself." No nation has as yet adopted this principle as a whole, and our own country, although it confined its territorial expansion for a hundred years to the western hemisphere, contemplated a military base in the Mediterranean sea during the American revolution. While it would be perfectly futile to imagine what such an establishment would have led to, yet it is an extremely interesting subject for speculation in view of the present war. We might have played a quite different rôle had our young republic succeeded, in 1777, in seizing the Zaffarine islands and in erecting a naval base on their shores.

The attempt was made on the initiative of Baron de Rullecourt, a Frenchman, who proposed the plan to the American commissioners then in Paris, especially to Mr. Deane. Previous to the submission of this scheme the baron had shown a disposition to contribute to the success of the American cause. He had raised a regiment of 600 men and 17 officers, including M. de Condre, and planned to embark with these troops for service in the American revolution.¹ Strange to say this military force never left the shores of France. Although Baron de Rullecourt was unsuccessful in this project his good will for America or his ill will against England—who knows his motive—led him to propose in the following spring a plan to seize and occupy the Zaffarine islands.

According to this plan Rullecourt was to raise 1,000 men and to provide equipment for the fortification of the islands.² Arthur Lee, one of the American commissioners then in Paris, gave the following warrant for taking possession of the Zaffarines:

"We the underwritten Commissioners Plenipotentiary of the United States of North America do in their name and by their

¹ Benjamin F. Stevens, *Facsimiles of manuscripts in European archives relating to America, 1772-1783* (London, 1889-1898), 13: 1364; 14: 1375.

² *Ibid.*, 2: 144.

authority take you into the service of the said States as Chief of a Corps which you are to raise and command, agreeable to the Plan by you delivered, respecting the Islands of the Zafarines understood to be disowned and deserted.

“And we authorize you to fortify and defend the said Islands as Commander in chief of the same, and having agreed to your request to naturalize you and the officers of your Corps, as subjects of the said United States, you are hereby permitted to carry the Colours of the thirteen United States of America and under the same Combat and Vanquish their enemies. Wishing you health and success we are etc.”³ Money was offered to aid this scheme by M. de Aranda of Madrid and M. de Chaumont of France.⁴

At this time the war was scarcely two years old and neither France nor Spain had as yet openly espoused the cause of the colonies. The Americans could barely sustain an army at home, why then should the commissioners seek to obtain control of three uninhabited and disowned islands in the Mediterranean sea? A contemporary writer speaks of Rullecourt's scheme as an attempt to give the continental congress an establishment for admiralty jurisdiction in European waters.⁵ American privateers were very active at this time in the neighborhood of both France and Spain, and many cargoes were coming from the seat of hostilities in return for war supplies and provisions from friendly foreign sources. When disputes arose over captures in European waters it often required an immeasurably long time to obtain instruction from America. A seat of admiralty jurisdiction in the Mediterranean would furnish a convenient and speedy means for the adjudication of such cases and would greatly facilitate the work of the American privateers. If these ends could have been realized who knows but that another St. Eustatia would have appeared on the other side of the Atlantic?

But what was planned under such promising auspices proved in the end abortive. A survey of the islands brought an unfavorable report and this is a probable explanation of the failure of the proposal to mature. But it is difficult to reconcile this

³ *Ibid.*, 1: 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14: 1450.

explanation with the action of France and Spain in 1848. These nations recognized the value of the Zaffarines as a refuge for ships and both attempted to take possession of them. A Spanish expedition reached the islands a few days before the French, seized the three islands and subsequently fortified the central one. Another probable explanation as to why Rullecourt's scheme was dropped by the American commissioners may be found in Arthur Lee's characterization of Rullecourt, made about a month after he had signed the latter's warrant. Lee said the baron had done "all kinds of things" in Poland, and added, "it is not impossible that he may sell this commission to the English ambassador, who will incense the pirate states against us by giving them notice of our design to possess ourselves of an island which by its position appears to belong to one of them."⁶ Indeed this was the recommendation of the English agent at Paris, Paul Wentworth, who, when informed of Rullecourt's plan, advised the British government to persuade the emperor of Morocco to seize the islands.⁷ Whatever is the true explanation the fact remains that the scheme was given up, and with its failure the imaginative baron passes out of history.

H. N. SHERWOOD

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6: 641.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3: 250.